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Sonic Autoethnographies: Personal listening as compositional context

IAIN FINDLAY-WALSH

University of Glasgow, School of Culture and Creative Arts, 16 University Gardens, Glasgow, UK, G12 8QL

Email: iain.findlay-walsh@glasgow.ac.uk

This article discusses a range of self-reflexive tendencies in field recording, soundscape composition and studio production, and explores examples of sonic practices and works in which the personal listening experiences of the composer are a key contextual and compositional element. As broad areas for discussion, particular attention is given to *soundscape composition as self-narrative* (exploring the representation of the recordist in soundscape works) and to *producing the hyperreal and the liminal* (considering spatial characteristics of contemporary auditory experience and their consequences for sonic practice). The discussion then focuses on the specific application of autoethnographic research methods to the practice and the understanding of soundscape composition. Compositional strategies employed in two recent pieces by the author are considered in detail. The aim of this discussion is to link autoethnography to specific ideas about sound and listening, and to some tendencies in field recording, soundscape composition and studio production, while also providing context for the discussion of the author's own practice and works. In drawing together this range of ideas, methods and work, sonic autoethnography is aligned with an emerging discourse around reflexive, embodied sound work.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article discusses what I will call an autoethnographic approach to soundscape composition, and some issues arising from it relating to everyday listening, recorded sound, space and subjecthood. This approach is informed by recent ideas in sound studies concerning sound and listening, specifically those of Salomé Voegelin, Brandon LaBelle, Steven Connor and Michael Bull. It builds upon the self-reflexive work of existing field recordists and soundscape composers, including Hildegard Westerkamp and Christopher DeLaurenti, and of

music producers who consider and rhetorically use soundscapes and ambiances in their work, including Marc Baron and Burial. It also draws on autoethnographic research methods, applying these to sound and listening in order to explore and to re-present everyday auditory experiences.

During this discussion I will refer to examples of works by existing composers, proposing these as useful precedents to or illustrative examples of sonic autoethnography. I will also discuss two of my own recent compositions in detail. The practice I am engaged in is part of an ongoing effort to research, interrogate and present relations between listening and subjecthood. I feel the complexity of these relations fleetingly as I listen, and have been exploring ways to record and reframe them. While developing these pieces, I have found it useful to borrow methods from autoethnography – a recently emerging research practice within social anthropology, which combines autobiographical and ethnographic writing methods. In transposing its techniques and forms into the practice of soundscape composition, the consequent interplay between autoethnography, recording and composing in my work has resulted in a focus on some aspects which are not usually emphasised in electroacoustic practice or the discourse around it. These include attending to the situational aspects of sound recording, pursuing extremes of self-reference, developing layered spatial narratives, oscillating between documentary and aesthetic aims and functions, and producing rhetorical reception situations which conflate recording, composing and listening roles. My recent pieces include multichannel soundscape compositions, stereo headphone pieces, public installations and idiosyncratic record releases. Personal listening and the self-situating listener are the shifting context for each work.

Through this article I am considering and exploring the relevance of autoethnography to a range of sonic practices, while proposing it as a potentially useful methodological framework for sound practitioners who engage with everyday soundscapes and personal listening in particular. My aim is to link autoethnography to specific ideas about sound and listening, and to some tendencies in field recording, soundscape composition and studio production, while also providing context for the discussion of my own practice and works. In drawing together this range of ideas, methods and work, I am aligning sonic autoethnography with an emerging discourse around reflexive, embodied sound work.

2. SOUND, LISTENER AND AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

The auditory self discovers itself in the midst of the world. (Connor 1997: 219)

In recent years, a number of key writers in sound studies have drawn upon a closely related set of ideas to advance theories on the relationship between sound, listening and subjecthood. Evolving during a period when the emphasis in musicology ‘has shifted to cultural context, reception, and subject position’ (Scott in Frith and Zagorski-Thomas 2012: vii), this recent thinking and writing on sound (Connor 1997; DeNora 2000; LaBelle 2010; Voegelin 2010; Bull 2012) has built upon the ideas of a range of mid- to late twentieth-century philosophers and cultural theorists to conceptualise listening as an activity through which listening subjects continually produce and position themselves in relation to the everyday soundworld.

Drawing on Theodor Adorno and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Salomé Voegelin posits that ‘[T]he subject in sound is an empirical not a transcendental subject ... It is the lived and concrete experience that constitutes the world as sonic life-world and the subject reciprocally generated within it’ (2010: 15). According to Brandon LaBelle, sound ‘reroutes the making of identity by creating a greater and more suggestive weave between self and surrounding’, while also emphasising ‘individual identity as a relational project’ (2010: xxi). For Steven Connor, ‘the auditory self is an attentive rather than an investigatory self, which takes part in the world rather than taking aim at it’ (1997: 219). Michael Bull echoes Jean Baudrillard to posit listening as an activity through which ‘sound colonizes the listener’ (Bull 2004: 283), while Tia DeNora, referencing both Adorno and Michel Foucault, suggests recorded music as a ‘technology of self’ (2000: 46–74).

In each case, listening is suggested as a kind of embodied thinking-feeling, a drawing together of the streams of information – sonic, spatial, social – which populate our daily lives. More than this, auditory experience is presented as a kind of perpetual, subject-forming activity. Listening as a means of producing what, where and who we are – auditory self as processual becoming. As Salomé Voegelin writes:

The reciprocal intertwining of the ‘I’ with the sonic life-world produces a transient and fleeting subject, en par with the sounds of its composition. The interfaced ‘I’ is not a solid entity but an ever passing and evolving subjectivity that drifts in and out of certainty from the doubt and experience that form it continually and contingently as a formless sonic self. (Voegelin 2010: 93)

These ways of understanding relations between sound, listening and subjecthood correspond with some of the key concerns and aims of autoethnographers. Autoethnography has emerged in recent years as a set of related methods and practices within (social) anthropology, whereby autoethnographers reflexively write (about) their own experiences as the basis for their cultural work. The emergence of autoethnography can be understood as a collective, heterogeneous attempt to deal with problems relating to representation, authorship

and authority which have developed in anthropology and sociology throughout the twentieth century in response to post-structuralist and post-colonial critiques of power. According to Stacy Holman Jones:

The crisis of representation ... motivated researchers to acknowledge how their own identities, lives, beliefs, feelings, and relationships influenced their approach to research and their reporting of 'findings'. This focus on representation encouraged qualitative researchers to search for more transparent, reflexive, and creative ways to do and share their research. Rather than deny or separate the researcher from the research and the personal from the relational, cultural, and political, qualitative researchers embraced methods that *recognised* and *used* personal-cultural entanglements. (Adams, Ellis and Jones 2015: 22)

By reflexively documenting their own experiences, autoethnographers foreground the issues of their own perspective, role and narrative voice as representational problems through which to research sociocultural context. As methodology for understanding culture, autoethnography explores the position and perspective of the researcher as the central subject of study, presenting the researcher's personal experiences, often through layered writing practices which generate interwoven self-narratives. Like Connor's 'auditory self', autoethnographers begin their research 'in the midst of the world', and as such, autoethnographic texts 'might wander, twist and turn, changing direction unexpectedly', or 'jump from one thought/feeling/memory or experience up or down or backwards, forwards or sideways to another' (Grant, Short and Turner 2013: 2). Such a scrambling of first-person experiences and perspectives often generates narrative ambiguities which invite interpretation by the reader, involving them in the process of meaning-making. In this way, autoethnographic texts can serve to conflate the roles of researcher/writer and reader, opening up 'a reflexive world in which the researcher/researched join with the reader to create a story' (ibid.: 2).

These forms and methods resonate with the practices of some field recordists and soundscape composers. Many such artists engage in recording activity as the self-conscious documentation of their own auditory experiences, as 'storing the listening process' (Riek 2013: 173), while exploring and developing methods through which to consider, interrogate and reflect on relationships between the everyday soundworld and listener. By composing with such documentary recordings – editing, layering, comparing, redacting, reframing and re-presenting them – soundscape composers often seek to involve and to implicate subsequent listeners in the enquiry, generating productive tensions between different listening perspectives, as well as between different recorded auditory environments. In my own work, I develop compositions deliberately and self-consciously along autoethnographic lines, swapping the writing and interweaving of texts for the recording and layering of first-person

auditory perspectives, and developing sonic/spatial self-narratives as a means to ‘connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political’ (Ellis 2004: xix).

In the following discussion I explore examples which illustrate a range of self-reflexive tendencies in field recording, soundscape composition and studio production, and which can be understood to focus on the personal listening practice and culture of the recordist/composer as a key contextual element. These examples precede the presentation of two of my own sonic autoethnographies. As broad areas for discussion particular attention is given first to *soundscape composition as self-narrative* (exploring the representation of the recordist in soundscape works), and then to *producing the hyperreal and the liminal* (discussing spatial characteristics of contemporary auditory experience and their consequences for sonic practice).

3. SOUNDSCAPE COMPOSITION AS SELF-NARRATIVE

The relational nature of field recording has long since caused the soundscape composer’s representation within their work to be a matter of compositional significance. Luc Ferrari’s reference to his ‘anecdotal’ recordings and to groundbreaking pieces such as *Presque Rien No. 1* (Ferrari 1970) as ‘electroacoustic nature photographs’ (Pauli 1971: 41 in Emmerson 1986: 34–5) implies both the documenting and the framing of a landscape, and highlights the consequent subject–object relationship between photographer and landscape that we might associate with the capturing and collecting of photographs. We can track the development of the relationship between sound recordist and soundscape – as sonic/spatial self-narrative – through subsequent works in the field.

A useful, well-known example can be found in Hildegard Westerkamp’s *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1996/1989), in which the recordist/composer calls attention to her implicit presence in field recordings made at Kits Beach, Vancouver, narrating them after the fact and superimposing the narration over an edit of the initial recordings. Speaking in the first person and in the present tense, the composer’s narration sits ambiguously between real-time response and evocative, analytic reflection. The voice of the composer can be heard to discuss and reflect on the content of the field recordings, the thoughts and feelings they evoke, the imaginary narratives they conjure up, and the compositional decisions taken in relation to them. The composer tells the listener which sounds she wishes were absent shortly before they are filtered out. Technical processes are referred to directly. One effect of this spoken narrative in the piece is a foregrounding of the complex relationship between aural environment, sound recording, recordist/composer and subsequent listener. Yet while the

nuance of this relationship is illuminated to an extent – the composer’s responses are also those of a listener – we are nonetheless offered a relatively consistent ‘meta-narrative’ by the composer, through which her voice and her own account of the recordings and listening is privileged. The composer ‘as composer’ tells us how *she* hears it.

The work of phonographer and sound activist Christopher DeLaurenti often captures the recordist engaged in a range of everyday activities and environments. As with *Kits Beach Soundwalk*, DeLaurenti’s pieces frequently include the recordist’s voice, however these vocal interjections are usually real-time responses, comments captured in reaction to changing environments and situations. In the various cycles of DeLaurenti’s ‘protest symphonies’, for example *Live At Occupy (for Audio Field Report side one 16 Minute Version)* (DeLaurenti 2012), we hear the recordist/composer’s voice, at times referring explicitly to their recording activities, at others to their general situation and to other people. In contrast to Westerkamp’s authorly reflections in *Kits Beach Soundwalk*, and while containing specific allusions to his role as recordist through the inclusion of direct spoken references, pieces such as *Live at Occupy...* foreground DeLaurenti’s changing agency in a variety of everyday situations. The recordist is embedded within the changing sonic/spatial/social environment around them. The episodic and disjointed forms which many of DeLaurenti’s ‘activist sound’ pieces take can be understood as analogous to the perpetually shifting subject-positions of a person engaged in the sense-making processes common to everyday (auditory) perception and experience. Fragmentary narratives emerge from sequences of seemingly partial documents, offering glimpses of the recordist’s multiple listening perspectives. As the press release for another ‘protest symphony’ piece – *Wallingford Foodbank* – has it, ‘DeLaurenti listens by way of a subjectivity composed on behalf of the microphone’ (Public Record 2008).

The recordist’s voice is just one marker of DeLaurenti’s presence in his pieces. What we might refer to as ‘handling noise’ – the sound of microphones being handled, fumbled, bumped, moved in and out of bags and pockets – plays a significant role in much of DeLaurenti’s work. Such sounds occur frequently, marking beginnings or key transitions in his compositions. These noises suggest and foreground an improvised, pragmatic approach to recording unpredictable scenarios. Crucially, they also highlight the position of the microphone in relation to the recordist’s body. Handling noise signifies that the microphone is being touched, worn, or carried by the recordist as they actively participate in their situation. The recording device literally extends from the recordist’s body and assists in performing a kind of auto-surveillance of their activities and subject-positions. The occurrence of such

noises in DeLaurenti's work communicates to the listener that what they are hearing is a document of the recordist's first-person perspective.

While handling noise can be understood as an aural signifier of personal perspective in field recordings, some practitioners conceive of their work as capturing their personal listening regardless of whether it includes explicit sonic markers of recordist-presence, such as (their) speech or handling noise. Sound anthropologist and soundscape composer Steven Feld makes a clear methodological and conceptual distinction between field recording where microphones are left unattended to record a particular environment, and his own practice of carrying microphones to record his personal listening encounters. Of his recording practice Feld writes:

I am always part of my recordings. I can always listen to my recordings and recover my breath, my bodily presence ... for me, the recording is always the audible trace of my presence as a listener. My recordings are always an archive of my history of listening and of the history of listening that is being recorded. You could say that my field recording praxis is to listen to histories of listening. That is why I am always present in the recording, always present in some way even if that presence is not audibly legible to the listener. (Feld in Carlyle and Lane 2013: 209)

As is often the case with DeLaurenti, Feld tends to be 'with' the recording device – it traces his unfolding position within and relation to aural environment and situation. Recording traces the environment *as* relation to recordist/listener, and subsequent listeners who engage with such recordings are party to the subject-forming, context-forming process of auditory perception. Feld describes much of his work in strikingly autobiographical terms, as 'making an acoustic mirror ... for making palpable, for making audible, for making public, for circulating and amplifying some aspect of what it means to listen in on sonic and social relations' (Feld in Carlyle and Lane 2013: 212).

These examples outline some approaches and methods which connect field recording and soundscape composition with self-narrative, and which explore and interrogate relations between recordist and soundscape. Each illustrates a practice in which the representation of the recordist's personal auditory experience – as critically engaged sonic/spatial encounter – is a key component.

4. AUDITORY SUBJECT-POSITION AND AURAL SELFIES IN *THE CLOSING CEREMONY*

The Closing Ceremony is a 5.1 multichannel soundscape composition which I completed in July 2015. The piece consists of field recordings and found recordings documenting a particular open-air concert event – the closing concert of the 2014 Commonwealth Games,

which took place in Glasgow in August of that year. The Games in general and the closing concert in particular (temporarily) dominated the city and its soundscape, effecting a general enforcement of listener–spectatorship. While the piece functions ostensibly as the audio document of a cultural event, it was developed as an autoethnography by using reflexive recording, editing and presentation methods in order to explore my listening and recording as subject-positioning activities. These methods include attending to what I will term the *auditory subject-positions* captured by various field recordings, the taking of *aural selfies*, and the contriving of a multiply-embedded listening experience through the piece’s presentation.

The recordings that form the basis of the *The Closing Ceremony* are as follows: a stereo recording which captures the official TV broadcast of the Commonwealth Games closing concert as it played out ‘live’ into the living room of my Glasgow flat; a range of field recordings captured while on a soundwalk close to and outside of the stadium-venue as the concert was taking place; multiple audio files ripped from smartphone-shot digital videos, which were filmed at the Commonwealth Games closing concert by audience members situated inside the stadium-venue, and subsequently uploaded to and broadcast on YouTube. This combination of recorded materials captures a range of listening perspectives in relation to the same concert event.

4.1. Auditory subject-position

While making *The Closing Ceremony*, I made field recordings by practising recording as the documentation of my auditory experiences. Rather than monitoring the sounds captured by the microphones by ‘listening in’ using headphones while recording, microphones were carried or worn, and considered as additional attendant ears, extending from my body and ‘doubling’ my listening activity as I engaged with my environment. Each resulting recording can be considered as both the document of an aural environment and the index of my *auditory subject-position* produced in relation to it. The use of the term *auditory subject-position* here draws on Allan Clarke’s discussion of ‘subject-position’ (with reference to recorded music) as corresponding to ‘the way in which characteristics of the musical material shape the general character of the listener’s response or engagement’ (Clarke 2005: 91–2). It also relates to Roshanak Kheshti’s notion of ‘aural positionality’, meaning the ‘aural “point of view”, the physical position that a researcher identifies with in aural ethnography’ (Kheshti 2009: 15). For my purposes, auditory subject-position refers *both* to the character of the listener’s engagement with their aural environment and to the listener’s sense of proximity and situation in relation to their aural environment. We can consider auditory subject-position to be the

embodied position-making/taking, which is relationally produced through auditory experience.

4.2. Aural selfies

The practice of self-consciously documenting auditory subject-position by making sound recordings has parallels with the ubiquitous cultural activity of taking ‘selfies’, or self-portrait photographs. While a selfie can be understood as an image of a person in a place, it can also be understood as an image of a person watching themselves taking a picture of themselves watching, in a place. There is a certain cyclical spectatorship which is both captured and initiated by a selfie, which corresponds to a wider culture of self-reference and self-broadcast synonymous with social media and present-day digital communications. Selfies can be understood to document and circulate an act of spectatorship, to quote Marc Augé, as though ‘the spectator in the position of the spectator were [their] own spectacle’ (Augé 1995: 70). When considering an analogy with sound recording, the self-conscious capture (and circulation) of one’s own auditory subject-position fits well. While Steven Feld explains his recording practice as holding up an ‘acoustic mirror’ to his critical listening in-situ, many of the recordings used in *The Closing Ceremony* document the position and responses of the recordist/listener in contexts which are already highly suggestive of listener-spectatorship (i.e. a live cultural event). As *aural selfies*, they are the recorded sound of me listening to myself making a recording of myself listening (in a place). This notion of aural selfies can similarly be applied to the audio ripped from audience-shot YouTube videos used in piece. This audio also traces a self-conscious spectatorship, whereby audience members have performed their role as audience by documenting and circulating their auditory subject-position, thus generating an aural equivalent to ‘a photographic object that initiates the transmission of human feeling in the form of a relationship’ (Baym and Senft 2015: 1589). In drawing together and layering this range of recordings, *The Closing Ceremony* can be thought of as a collage of multiple aural selfies.

While making a piece, I often make sound recordings to document my listening experiences during the compositional process, and then introduce these new recordings into an emerging edit. While editing *The Closing Ceremony*, I set up multiple microphones in my home studio – a stereo pair mounted just behind my head and a boundary microphone attached to the surface of my computer desk – and made recordings of the process of listening to, editing and monitoring the piece. In these recordings we can hear the sounds of my typing, mouse clicking and shifting in my seat within the close and dry acoustic environment of a

small home studio. We can also hear the sound of the original field recordings and found recordings as they are transmitted out of my studio monitors and into my home studio environment as I listen back to and edit them. Consequently, these new recordings constitute further degrees of mediation and further reframings of listening activity in relation to the initial Commonwealth Games concert event. When considered as documents of listening activity, these new recordings can be understood to capture me listening to me listening to me listening to the Commonwealth Games closing concert.

This reflexive recording method is analogous to writing methods employed in autoethnographic research, where writing is used to continually reflect on research activity ‘in the moment’ and at various stages of the research process. Autoethnographies generated using such methods often emerge as disjointed and excessively self-referential texts, in which ‘fractions of an experience link to other fractions of another experience ... lacking specificity and defined authenticity ... as the author authors and re-authors their writing’ (Grant et al. 2013: 2). In the case of *The Closing Ceremony*, the ‘authoring and re-authoring’ of the piece manifests itself not in the form of text-based reflection (written or spoken), but as the product of specific recording and editing strategies, practised as real-time critical responses to auditory experience (see Sound example 1, noting that this excerpt is a stereo reduction from the 5.1 multichannel piece). In some sections of the piece my editing activity (mouse-clicking) can be heard superimposed over the edits it has generated. Through these strategies, personal listening is repeatedly and reflexively graphed in/as new recordings and edits.

This practice of excessive re-recording and editing also relates to John Levack Drever’s writing on soundscape and ethnography. In the 2002 paper, ‘Soundscape Composition: The Convergence of Ethnography and Acousmatic Music’, he proposes soundscape composition as essentially ethnographic in its concern for ‘the making and presenting of representations of environmental sound’ (Drever 2002: 21). At the close of the article, the author calls for examples of sound *praxis* which ‘will realise pertinent means of addressing such propositions as “framing the framer as he or she frames the other”’ (ibid.: 26). Drever’s question of how to frame or, rather, how to account for and confront in practice the problem of the researcher’s own representation within their work is perhaps the central methodological question that autoethnographers contend with. It is also a central compositional enquiry in *The Closing Ceremony*.

4.3. Multiply-embedded listening

The approach to arranging and presenting the recorded materials used in *The Closing Ceremony* can be explained as follows. First, the recordings are synchronised and layered (synced on a DAW timeline, channel by channel), before multiple real-time improvised edits are carried out by record-enabling and ‘playing’ the mute automation controls across all channels. I repeatedly listened back to all the audio simultaneously from start to finish, while recording the process of redacting it. This process relates methodologically to the approach taken to making the initial field recordings, insofar as, by making real-time editing/muting decisions in relation to the documentary recordings of the closing concert as I listen to them, I engage in further listening/self-situating activity in relation to the initial event (the closing concert), albeit after various degrees of mediation. While editing and arranging the recordings in this way, I am still an audience to the Commonwealth Games closing concert, however, in this instance I perform my subject-positioning not by making recordings, but by effectively ‘switching on and off’ recorded microphone signal. After repeating this process many times, a fragmentary collage begins to emerge in which disparate auditory perspectives on the same concert event can be heard as they abruptly mask and unmask each other (see Sound example 2).

The finished edit is then presented in a new concert situation via a 5.1 surround sound system, creating a reception encounter in which the audience is immersed in layered and fragmentary re-presentations of various listening perspectives relating to a previous concert. The listener, on encountering *The Closing Ceremony*, ‘takes the place’ of a range of previous listeners, and is encouraged to explore relationships between their own first-person listening perspective/context as an audience member seated in a concert hall and those of previous listeners in relation to a prior concert. This reflexive, rhetorical aspect of the piece’s presentation is crucial to its autoethnographic form and function, and is further emphasised by frequent quiet passages and ‘silent’ pauses in the piece. In this way, the audience to *The Closing Ceremony* is engaged in a multiply-embedded concert listening experience – they listen *through* a range of previous first-person listening perspectives which interweave with their own.

5. PRODUCING THE HYPERREAL AND THE LIMINAL

The interplay between different listening perspectives and between recorded and ‘real’ listening environments in *The Closing Ceremony* is intended as a response to and an extension of what can be understood to be a general facet of everyday (auditory) experience. Namely, that in an everyday milieu increasingly dominated by electronic technologies, listeners

regularly encounter real and recorded sonic spaces simultaneously, which they are required to reconcile, interpret and navigate. With reference to the visual world, Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy have referred to contexts in which ‘electronic media increasingly saturate our everyday spaces with images of other places and of other (imagined or real) orders of space’ (Couldry and McCarthy 2004: 1). This diagnosis can equally be applied to the aural, as recorded sound and specifically recorded music (representations of aural space) become increasingly pervasive. Present-day listeners are tasked with producing their auditory subject-position in relation to layers of sonic/spatial information. Such listening activity continually (re)situates listening subjects *between* real and represented aural environments, in liminal spaces ‘in which a boundary is unresolved’ (Dietz in Eubanks and Lamb 2014: 18). Everyday listeners engage in frequent decision-making about where to focus, what to ignore, and often, what new sounds to introduce into their auditory experiences by way of music choices. This activity can be understood in terms of the ‘procedures of everyday creativity’ theorised by Michel de Certeau, who writes:

To a rationalised, expansionist and at the same time centralised, clamorous, and spectacular production corresponds *another* production, called ‘consumption’. The latter is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order. (de Certeau 1988: xii–xiii)

By practising listening as a productive, self-situating tactic, today’s urban listeners actively formulate the hyperreal aural environments which frame their experiences, and their own liminal position(s) in relation to them. Perhaps no present-day listening activity exemplifies this more than mobile personal stereo or iPod use. Referring to the practice of urban headphone listening, Michael Bull writes:

Personal stereo use reorganizes users’ relation to space and place. Sound colonizes the listener, but it is also used to actively re-create and reconfigure the spaces of experience ... Sound enables users to manage and orchestrate their spaces of habitation in a manner that conforms to their desires. (Bull 2004: 283)

The language chosen here is apt, as Bull has contemporary listeners ‘orchestrating’ their sonic-spatial experiences using already-produced music via portable personal listening technology. As Brian Eno has proposed, and both William Moylan and Simon Zagorski-Thomas have explored further, studio-produced (pop) music has long since been developed as the iteration of idealised, virtual space (Eno 2009; Zagorski-Thomas 2010; Moylan 2012). Bull’s personal stereo (iPod) listener, through their listening choices, knowingly uses such music as material with which to compose the spaces and perspectives of their experiences as they travel. Recorded soundscapes mask and merge with the ‘real’ soundworld as the iPod

listener graphs their shifting position, between the sonic real and the virtual, between spatial production and reception, between listening and composing. This present-day personal listening paradigm – in which layered, hyperreal soundscapes interface with the liminal auditory perspectives of engaged listeners – can be explored productively through reflexive approaches to soundscape composition and studio production. Such approaches can generate listening encounters through which the experience, position and role of the recordist/listener is re-presented, re-lived, explored and interrogated. This kind of practice-led enquiry fits well with understandings of autoethnography, as both ‘self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self and others in social contexts’ (Spry 2001: 710), and as ‘a story of the body told through the body which makes cultural conflict concrete’ (Langellier in Spry 2001: 710).

5.1. *Hidden Tapes*

One piece of soundscape work which reflexively engages with hyperreal soundscapes and liminal listening perspectives is *Hidden Tapes* (Baron 2014), the 2014 CD release by improviser and sound artist Marc Baron. Each of the five stereo audio tracks on *Hidden Tapes* consists of combinations of collaged and abruptly edited field recordings and found audio. Intimate first-person field recordings, heavy with handling noise, are interwoven with other environmental sound, appropriated audio from feature films and grainy textures generated by manipulating the sonic artefacts of analogue tape playback. The combining and layering of these recordings produces a sense of complex, mediated proximity – from the sparse ambiances of the environmental recordings to the up-close materiality of the tape noise. As a listener I navigate my way through layers of mediated and represented distance. As with *The Closing Ceremony*, my auditory subject-position is produced through my critical and interpretive listening. Real/hyperreal spaces are tested, compared, listened *through*, like veils. There is frequently something exhilarating about this listening effort. By attempting to engage with the discombobulating edited ambiances of each track, my position is somehow momentarily affirmed. Listening is a conscious *performance* of auditory self-situation. In her theorising of the listening subject, Salomé Voegelin writes that listening ‘does not show me *a* place, but grants me insight into the process of *my* place through its sonic dimensions: transience, simultaneity and immersivity’ (Voegelin 2010: 183). As a listening exercise, albeit an evocative one, *Hidden Tapes* grants such insight by inviting the listener to work through and interpret dense textures of represented aural space.

While the sonic spaces of *Hidden Tapes* are multiple and layered, they often sound rather solitary. Much like the record’s track titles, the tracks have a personal, diaristic focus to them,

and are often built around recordings which depict the activities of a lone recordist/subject. By focusing the pieces around documented fragments of the recordist's personal listening, the recording and editing strategies on *Hidden Tapes* occasionally succeed in conflating composer and listener roles. On the track *1991–2005* we hear abstract electroacoustic textures punctuated by what sounds like a recording device being operated up close, while on both *2010–2012* and *2013 – A happy summer with children* we hear various field recordings and found audio superimposed over the recorded sounds of a cassette tape being ejected and handled. The specific editing and balancing of the cassette-handling recordings suggest that it is indeed the listener who has ejected and is now handling the tape – the heard effect is one of the listener waking from the 'hyperreal' and into the auditory 'real'. Composer and listener roles are switched while the materiality and tactility of the recording and playback media are foregrounded, with the effect of bringing the recordist's physical actions together with the listener's cognitive and interpretative processes. The subject-position of the composer is caused to momentarily merge with that of the listener. Such deliberate fostering of confusion between author and audience roles is a key feature of autoethnographic writing, which draws on post-structural notions of subject-as-process. Discussing narrative strategies within contemporary autoethnography, Nigel Short writes:

Narrative poststructural voice rejects the assumption of such stable identity in subjectivity, aspiring to speak from its inevitable inscription within overlapping, intersecting, and often contradictory discourses. The poststructural 'voice' is a constant performance of shifting, plural and often discordant combinations of discursive power and positioning. In this content, voice is always provisional and contingent, always becoming. The task of writing research is thus to show how subjectivity is produced, rather than to display a privileged and secure, transcendent narrative identity position ... As product this might be described as the poststructural voice of the emerging 'I'. (Grant et al. 2013: 8)

In *Hidden Tapes*, a plurality of 'voices' is substituted for multiple reflexive documents of aural environment and listener-position. By re-presenting his own position as recordist/listener within a multifarious texture of other environmental representations, Baron decentres both his own subject-position and that of the subsequent listener, forcing them to confront and work with the liminality of their listening perspective.

5.2. *Burial*

Another studio production which engages with and evokes both hyperreal aural environments and liminal listening perspectives is the 2006 eponymous release by experimental dubstep producer, *Burial* (Burial 2006). While ostensibly an album of songs, *Burial* draws together aspects of songwriting, dance production and soundscape composition, using spatial

representations as compositional materials to rhetorically reflect on listening contexts and experiences. Field recordings are combined with programmed electronic beats, digital synthesisers, sampled vinyl ‘crackle’ and manipulated samples from pop music, film and video game sources. Similarly to Baron’s *Hidden Tapes*, *Burial* produces layered sonic textures by combining a wide variety of spatial audio, from the up-close grain of urban field recordings captured ‘on the move’, to the melancholic wash of synth pads drenched in digital reverb. The choice of sound sources sets up a fruitful dialogue between everyday soundworlds and digital sounds and production processes which might be understood to mimic and represent them. The composer Ambrose Field has referred to a ‘rhetoric of reality’ within soundscape composition, proposing four distinct orders of reality identifiable in composed soundscapes. These are listed as ‘hyper-real’, ‘real’, ‘virtual’ and ‘non-real’ (Field 2000: 45). In discussing these categories, Field writes that ‘a hyper-real environment exists where it is not possible for the audience to tell the difference between simulation and recorded reality itself’ (Field 2000: 43). For Field, the potential for soundscape composers to simulate various orders of reality through recording, manipulating and presenting audio introduces new compositional parameters, as well as new semantic and aesthetic possibilities, which relate to aspects of the postmodern everyday soundworld. The tracks throughout *Burial* deliberately blur distinctions between aural environments, leaving the listener to navigate their way through real, virtual and hyperreal soundscapes. As the album’s label press release highlights, ‘You can never tell if the crackle is the burning static off pirate radio, or the tropical downpour of the submerged city out of the window’ (Fisher 2014: 98). The composer refers to a deliberate evocation of reflective urban journeys as a subject/focus of the tracks:

It’s more about when you come back from being out somewhere; in a minicab or a night bus, or with someone, or walking home across London late at night, dreamlike, and you’ve still got the music kind of echoing in you, in your bloodstream, but with real life trying to get in the way. (*Burial* in Hancox 2007)

Many of the tracks on *Burial*, and on the follow-up album *Untrue*, seem to have been designed to re-present the sound of listening to music, and specifically listening on headphones, to the listener. On tracks such as ‘In McDonalds’ and ‘Distant Lights’ we hear songs – vocals, samples, synth hooks and beats – but enmeshed in the sounds of the urban spaces we might pass through while listening to them. Just as real and virtual recorded ambiences (field recordings and ‘hoover bass’) combine and blur in the tracks, the listening perspective is doubled in the composition – we are both listening to the song, and listening to listening to the song. While listening on headphones, the sounds of our wider auditory

environment unavoidably bleed into and combine with the music – further complicating notions of real and virtual soundscape. This layering is compounded by the inclusion of samples from video games (e.g. Metal Gear Solid in ‘Distant Lights’) which extend the scope of the real/virtual aural language of the compositions even more. As with Baron’s *Hidden Tapes*, the complex and layered listening perspectives invoked on *Burial* are in between spaces, between music production and reception, and real and virtual soundscape.

Both *Burial* and *Hidden Tapes*, while originating from the distinct idioms of soundscape composition and dance production, arguably share compositional methods and aesthetic traits. Both use the collaging of diverse aural ambiances to reflexively explore listening perspectives, relations and roles. Both feature autobiographical elements and focus on depictions of vacant spaces and solitary subjects. Furthermore, both *Burial* and *Hidden Tapes* can be understood in autoethnographic terms, as critically engaged applications of reflexively autobiographical recording and composing activities, where first-person narratives are appropriated and layered in pursuit of a deeper cultural understanding of personal listening.

6. RE-PRESENTING HEADPHONE LISTENING IN *BORN ON*

The stereo headphone piece *Born On*, which I completed in late 2015, was developed as an attempt to explore hyperreality and liminality in everyday (urban) auditory experience. The basic idea for the piece was to record and re-present my headphone listening during a repeated urban work commute. Multiple portable sound recorders were used simultaneously to capture the counterpoint between real and virtual soundworlds, as I listened to the same song repeatedly on headphones while commuting by train and walking on foot (note that the recorded song was also self-composed, sung and produced). The resulting recordings were then layered and redacted (using a similar method to *The Closing Ceremony*), and subsequently presented as a stereo headphone piece for listeners to encounter while walking.

As with *The Closing Ceremony*, the approach to recording *Born On* considered microphones as extensions of the recordist’s body and listening capacity, capable of documenting personal listening. One hand-held stereo recorder was used to record the sounds of my environment as I travelled, while a mobile phone, recording in my pocket, captured environmental sounds and the sounds of my body’s movements, functioning as a kind of contact microphone. Additionally, a pair of ‘in-ear’ binaural microphones was used along with a second stereo recorder. These microphones were inserted into my ears thus enabling further detailed documenting of my auditory experience during the repeated journeys. Crucially, these in-ear microphones enabled the documenting of my listening to music while

wearing headphones as I travelled, as the recorded music was transmitted through a pair of headphones which were placed over my ears and thus over the binaural microphones. The binaural microphones captured the sounds of my headphone listening as one of the partial, not total, masking of the wider auditory environment by the headphones and the recorded music which they were transmitting into my ears.

While Michael Bull's research on iPod listening emphasises the 'dominant organising potential of privatised sound' (Bull 2012: 198), the recordings captured by the in-ear microphones in *Born On* reveal a liminal aural space *between* recorded music, wider auditory environment, and the recordist-listener's own body. The rhythmic, pitched, timbral and spatial content of real-world sounds can be heard to merge with and diverge from the recorded music, while my body can be heard to navigate or 'play' through these braided aural stimuli. The in-ear binaural recordings capture what has already been heard in everyday auditory experience – what is already known *during* the act of headphone listening – that such listening activity facilitates the active interweaving of the body through the layered rhythms and in between spaces of the urban everyday. As Brandon LaBelle has remarked:

The surfaces and conditions of the environment, such as the street, operate as tangible features by which to find a sense of footing, locking into existing patterns ... while always seeking personal trajectories. One latches onto location. Such a view expands understanding of the inter-relation of self and surrounding by appreciating the material world as elemental partner. Auditory experience dynamically operates within this larger frame, granting music a significantly special place within this exchange. The patterns, repetitions, vocal expressions, and melodic lines of music create points of contact, of habitation, while also infusing the environment with a palpable energy. (LaBelle 2010: 131)

By synchronising and combining the in-ear binaural recordings with the hand-held stereo recordings and the audio captured by the mobile phone in my pocket, I was able to approach the editing and mixing of *Born On*... as a play of emphasis between the sounds of my wider aural environment, the headphone music, and my body's movements through space. Composed using a similar 'redacting' technique to that of *The Closing Ceremony*, the edit of this piece emerges as a series of out-of-sequence audio snapshots of my daily commutes – a fragmentary and non-linear re-presentation of my listening as I negotiate between sonic spaces (see Sound example 3).

Encountering the piece – on headphones while walking – is intended to be a disorientating experience, one which plays with listening as an activity of self-situating. The recorded sound of previous headphone listening experiences intermittently masks and reveals the sound of our present headphone listening. *Born On* involves the listener in a kind of self-referential *performance* of headphone listening, through which they can simultaneously

participate in and critically reflect on the hyperreality and liminality of everyday auditory spaces and experiences.

7. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this article I have explored a range of soundscape works and practices in which the personal listening experiences of the composer are a key contextual and compositional element. Each piece discussed engages with personal listening as a simultaneous composition and reception context. Such an approach facilitates the development of soundscape work as sonic/spatial self-narrative, while enabling critical engagement with the hyperreality of everyday soundscapes, and the liminal positions and perspectives of present-day listeners. By developing a compositional practice of sonic autoethnography, I have been exploring personal listening as compositional context in order to engage with the changing nature of auditory experience, and with changing relations between listening and subjecthood. If, as Brandon LaBelle has proposed, the study of everyday sound and listening might be undertaken as ‘a means of occupying and exploring the multiple perspectives of the present’ (LaBelle 2010: xxvi), then the combination of soundscape composition and autoethnographic research practices discussed here can be considered a potentially useful methodology for exploring such multiple perspectives through sonic practice.

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